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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 COLOMBO 000703

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND SCA/RA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [MARR](#) [ETRD](#) [SENV](#) [ENRG](#)
MV
SUBJECT: MALDIVES: ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER URGES
FURTHER PROGRESS ON REFORM

REF: A. COLOMBO 629
[1](#)B. COLOMBO 289

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On a May 7-8 trip to Maldives, Assistant Secretary Boucher, accompanied by Ambassador, met with

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President Gayoom, government officials, members of the opposition, and women active in politics and civil society. Discussions covered the need for more concrete steps on political reform, prospects for further security cooperation, worries of increasing Islamic fundamentalism, the possibility of expanded economic ties with the U.S., continued barriers to women's political and economic parity, and the endemic drug problem in Maldives. The Attorney General expressed concern about the slow pace of political reforms and the opposition complained that the president was dragging his feet. The opposition advocated proceeding with a national vote on a parliamentary versus presidential system of government in order to finish the revised constitution. Assistant Secretary Boucher urged government officials to implement fully the reform proposals to which they have committed, and expressed strong hope that a multi-party election will proceed in 2008 as scheduled. He called on the opposition to cooperate constructively to pass reform legislation and to have a voice in drafting a new constitution. Assistant Secretary Boucher reiterated these messages in a televised speech on democratic stability in the region and at a press conference. End summary.

PRESIDENT GAYOOM DISCUSSES
REFORM, EDUCATION, ENVIRONMENT

¶2. (SBU) In his May 7 meeting with President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher urged progress on the political reform process and discussed security cooperation with the U.S. and the potential for increased economic ties. In addition, he heard concerns about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the prevalence of drugs in Maldives. President Gayoom also asked that an American diplomat be permanently posted in Maldives. Assistant Secretary Boucher replied that the U.S. would like to establish an American Presence Post if funding permits.

¶3. (C) Responding to a question about why the democratization progress has stalled, President Gayoom said the opposition is not sincere about reform and has blocked debate in the constitutional assembly. Assistant Secretary Boucher noted that hard-liners within the government were also slowing progress toward consensus, and urged the president to strengthen institutions such as the judiciary, elections commission, and free press. He said the U.S. is watching the democratization process closely and making every effort to encourage progress. Gayoom said a Commonwealth proposal to hold a constitutional conference with both the government and opposition could provide a way forward.

¶4. (SBU) President Gayoom said he places a high priority on education and noted that the Maldivian government is funding students to attend international universities. Ambassador Boucher replied that the Embassy is exploring ways to promote linkages with American educational institutes. The president noted that some Maldivian students receive scholarships from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and are increasingly orthodox in their observance of Islam. However, he was confident there was no religiously-based violence or militant activity in the Maldives.

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¶5. (SBU) The president pointed out that Maldives, a low-lying atoll nation, is particularly susceptible to the negative impact of global climate change. He said that the U.S. can work on the environment "even outside of the Kyoto protocol." Ambassador Boucher agreed, saying the U.S. has invested heavily in research on clean energy and conservation and relies on technological and market-driven approaches. He added that the U.S. firm Southwest Windpower is interested in helping Maldives develop sustainable energy.

REFORMIST CABINET MINISTERS
SEEK FURTHER CHANGES

¶6. (C) In separate meetings with Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed and Attorney General Hassan Saeed, Assistant Secretary Boucher urged the government to implement reforms

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it had proposed, such as stronger independence for the judiciary and greater freedom of assembly. Shaheed said Maldives has improved from its baseline, but has a long way to go to meet international standards. Saeed criticized the slow pace of reforms, saying progress in 2006 was "completely unsatisfactory." He noted the problem of building institutions to cater to individuals, such as the governing party's call for a presidential rather than a parliamentary system of government mainly to allow President Gayoom to stay in power. He said judicial reform was impossible with the current chief justice in the lead, adding that a proposed police integrity commission failed because the chief of police was permitted to select the commissioners. He also predicted that once a civil service act is in place to protect government employees from unfair dismissal, many of them will cancel their memberships in the governing political party. Saeed asked that the international community publicly pressure the government to live up to its reform commitments.

He assessed that the Commonwealth proposal to bring the government and opposition together to cooperate on drafting a new constitution, probably at a venue outside of Maldives, is "the only hope" of moving democratization forward.

HARD-LINERS RESIST FASTER REFORM -----

17. (C) Representing the hard-line faction within the government, Home Minister Thasmeen Ali and Police Chief Adam Zahir portrayed reform as proceeding on track. They highlighted training programs for police with international consultants and a shift from confession-based convictions to evidence-based investigations. They said more police are needed to limit demonstrations effectively, but Assistant Secretary Boucher suggested a different approach, in which

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the police role is to direct crowds and permit peaceful assemblies to proceed. Boucher also noted that adequate representation in government and opportunities to voice concerns, such as a free press, might keep people from taking to the streets to express their views. Ali and Zahir responded, "All press is opposition. Even the government papers are critical in order to sell copies. The media is a free-for-all, it's dangerous." Ambassador Boucher concluded the meeting by lauding police training efforts, but noting that eyes are on the Maldives during the period of transition, and it will be important to maintain transparency and accountability.

OPPOSITION FRUSTRATED BY SLOW PROGRESS -----

18. (SBU) Leaders of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party told the Assistant Secretary that 200 party members are either detained or under investigation, most for violating a presidential decree on assembly. They complained of

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heavy-handed police tactics to break up demonstrations and politically motivated prosecutions and dismissals from government jobs. They said they are willing to move forward on constitutional reform, and are waiting only for a scheduled referendum on a parliamentary versus presidential form of government. In June 2006, the parliament agreed to put the matter to a national vote, but several delays have kept the process from going forward. The opposition hopes the referendum will demonstrate that the public, in rejecting a presidential system, are seeking a change not just in the form of government, but in the top leadership, specifically President Gayoom. The Maldivian Democratic Party is seeking to generate international pressure on the government to allow the vote to take place. Party officials would also like to see reform bills, such as a new penal code, adopted and implemented. Assistant Secretary Boucher encouraged the opposition to work with the government to keep the political reform process moving forward.

ECONOMIC ISSUES -----

19. (SBU) The Assistant Secretary met with Deputy Trade Minister Abdullah Salih to advocate the purchase of Bell helicopters and Boeing aircraft. Salih said his ministry is supportive of increasing trade with the U.S., though the civil aviation authorities remain wary of purchasing helicopters ever since a crash in the 1980s led to a brief dip in tourism. He suggested that Bell donate a helicopter so that greater familiarity with the craft might allay concerns. Ambassador Boucher and Salih also discussed ways to enhance trade relations, perhaps by promoting tourism in Maldives to American expatriates living in the region or by encouraging American businesses present in nearby countries to expand into Maldives.

DEFENSE MINISTER ON SECURITY COOPERATION
AND BLACKLISTING OF AMERICAN CITIZEN

¶10. (SBU) Defense Minister Ismail Shafeeu welcomed continued cooperation on joint military exercises and offered thanks for training opportunities in the U.S. He said that Maldives is "considering participating" in international peacekeeping operations, as requested by the Ambassador. The Assistant Secretary stated that he appreciates the strong relationship

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between the security forces of both countries and looks forward to working closely together in future.

¶11. (SBU) Since the Defense Minister is responsible for immigration issues, Assistant Secretary Boucher raised the case of Adam Cooper, a dual U.S.-U.K. national expelled from Maldives on April 19 (ref A). The Defense Minister said Cooper, behaving "arrogantly" as a foreigner, had gotten too involved in sensitive local politics, and besides, "was half British" and therefore should not be a priority for the U.S. When asked what resolution the U.S. is seeking, Boucher suggested Cooper at least be permitted to return to Maldives briefly to collect his belongings.

CONCERNS ABOUT RISING
ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

¶12. (SBU) Several government officials, including parliamentarians and representatives of the Ministry of Gender attending a women's round-table discussion, expressed worry that Islamic fundamentalism is on the rise. Many women said there was a pervasive attitude in society that women are incapable of taking leadership roles in business or politics, and shari'a law disadvantages them as well. They were

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concerned that people are increasingly drawn to Islamic orthodoxy, creating further obstacles to women's participation in public life. Assistant Secretary Boucher told interlocutors that the Embassy is working with Ambassador Tahir-Kheli in the office of Women's Issues to identify ways to enhance women's involvement in civil society.

¶13. (SBU) The Attorney General felt that the Chief Justice, as head of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, has not done enough to provide moderate imams to outer atolls. Other officials cited past attendance by Maldivian students at madrassahs in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan as a source of increased fundamentalism. The Assistant Secretary highlighted Embassy efforts to enhance religious moderation, such as working to get an Education-USA advisor posted in Maldives to promote American universities and vocational programs.

HIGH PREVALENCE OF DRUGS

¶14. (SBU) United Nations Children's Fund Resident Representative Ken Maskall and members of the National Narcotics Control Board separately told Ambassador Boucher that high rates of drug use in Maldives are creating serious problems. Heroin, in the form of "brown sugar" which is smoked, is the drug of choice, and the average age of first use is 12, Maskall said. The Narcotics Board officials said more trained counselors could help, but there remains a dire need for better educational, employment, and after-school program opportunities for Maldives' young population. Officials asked if it would be possible to visit drug treatment facilities in the U.S. Embassies will follow up to see if a Voluntary Visitor Program is feasible.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OUTREACH

¶15. (U) In addition to holding the women's round-table discussion, the Assistant Secretary launched the GLOBE initiative in Maldives at a local school in the presence of the Environment and Education Ministers. He also gave a speech on democratic stability in the region and held a press conference at the American Corner at the Male' library. At the latter two events, Assistant Secretary Boucher said that while there has been some political progress, it is vital that the government actively implement its reform proposals and move the legislation through the constitutional legislature. He stated that democratization should encompass three layers, with the first two, education and the creation of independent institutions, creating a solid foundation for the third, political processes. He also expressed hope that constructive dialogue across political parties could lead to a stronger constitution in time for the scheduled 2008 multi-party election.

¶16. (C) COMMENT: The mix of meetings with both reformers such as the Foreign Minister and Attorney General and hardliners such as the Home Minister made it clear that there are rifts within government ranks over the future of the reform process. The president can do more to promote tolerance for political pluralism. We will continue to press for steps in that direction. The proposed Commonwealth process, currently the most promising format for encouraging dialogue across the parties, will be helpful to moving constitutional reform forward and the successful conduct of multi-party elections in 2008. It is encouraging that the opposition has shifted its primary focus to ensuring it has an opportunity to contest elections. This may move the discussion away from complaints about government abuses to a constructive discussion on systemic improvements. We will continue to

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urge both sides to find common ground and make progress on democratic reform.

¶17. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher cleared this message.
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